Existential Crisis in the Female Protagonists of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Selected Novels

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Introduction

The elementary study of the selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has brought out some interesting points of convergence in the light of existential crisis from various facts which make them ideal subjects for this study. A detailed study will definitely provide novel insight about the causes of developing to existential crisis amongst the female protagonists. It will also ascertain the comprehensibility and depth of human predicament from issues central to various angles. To sum up, the selected novelists have grasped and extensively portrayed existential crisis as a prevailing subject/theme in modern literature. They represent an era of anxiety, turmoil and interrogation, an attempt to explore self and find answers about the age old questions "what's the sole reason behind my existence?"

Since literature is a mirror of society, it is directly or indirectly engaged with contemporary social, political and economic realities. Existential crisis is a theme that finds its expression in works of literature since time immemorial. In the 21st century, the theme acquires a greater relevance due to the various factors that impact human life and lead to crises in individual life. Hence this study has been undertaken to study the concept of existential crisis from the perspective of various philosophers in select works. In this context, this thesis will focus on how existential crisis shapes the life and destiny of an individual and how the individual faces and resolves/ reconciles her/him to her/his predicament. The dilemma faced by an individual with regard to the meaning of life, the reason behind the existence is existential crisis; it is also popular as existential dread. Existential crisis incur in instances where people doubt about possessing significance about their existence. It can be generally, but not inherently, linked to sadness or inevitably pessimistic speculations about intent in life.

The novels selected for this study have been published between the years 1999 and 2012. Indian Fiction in English deserves greater analysis not only for foregrounding the experiences of existential crisis on the global stage, but also for its deeper understanding of its causes from a personal, social, cultural, economical and psychological viewpoint. Chitra Banerjee has extensively dealt with the multidimensional issues of existential crisis in the global domain. The postmodern world presents a completely changed narrative not only due to the complex structure but in terms of subjectivity. It is a pivotal moment in exploring the idea of existential dilemma from diverse perspective since this period has been massively shaped by the economic, social and technological advances. Hence, this era offers a vantage point for an objective view of understanding and analyzing the ground causes for existential crisis. Chitra Banerjee portrays even the most ancient character through a postmodern sub-consciousness which makes her work recent and internationally acclaimed. Therefore, the novels selected for the study also present a wide cross-section of understanding the root causes of existential crisis incurred by female protagonists in a universal context.

Works Selected for the Study

The selected works include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's four novels namely: *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010) and *Oleander Girl* (2012).

The Indian writer Chitra Banerjae Divakaruni is renowned for her fine depiction of South Asian experiences with immigrants. Chitra Banerjee is a well recognized Indian Diasporic writer. Primarily, through three genres such as poetry, fiction and short story collections, she accomplished her career as a writer. This study intends to explore the issue of existential crisis amongst the female protagonists of these selected novels by Chitra Banerjee and how does the characters react and resolve it.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruní, born in Calcutta, Calcutta, immigrated to the United States, at the age of 19, from Wright State University in Ohio and was awarded an English Master's Degrees from Dayton State University. Her literary career as a poet started with *The Razon for Nasturtiums* (1990). Her first Arranged Marriage short fictional story won the American Buch Grant, the PEN Josephine Miles Award and the Bay Area Reviewers Award. *The Mistress of Spices*, one of Divakaruni's best-selling books, was also developed in cinema with the same title. *The Mistress of Spices* (1995), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) and *Brotherhood of the Conch Series: The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005), *Shadowland* (2009) are some of her significant works. Her Short story collections include *Arranged Marriage* (1995), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) and *The Lives of Strangers* (2005).

The narrative of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was built around her background as an American Indian migrant. In the past years, most of her novels have been interpreted and analyzed by historians in terms of isolation, diaspora, identity crisis, feminism, modernism etc.

Sister of My Heart (1999): Anju and Sudha, have been introduced in the novel. Girls are tells the tale of their encounters around their own expressions. The reader traces Sudha and Anju closely throughout puberty, adulthood, and teenage years in chronological order. The rich plot of the story depicts Indian cultures and practices and primarily the accounts of Calcutta. It's a tale, a friend and a friendship of sisters. This book discusses the problems of existential crisis and the search for a resolution.

The Palace of Illusions (2008) - The Mahabharat, naated rfrom the viewpoint of one remarkable woman and woman, is a re-imagination of the world-famous India epic. It is a time of half history, half a myth, and completely surreal, that is, in the war-torn world of today. The book traces the journey of Panchaali, following his valiant twirling act as a woman stripped from her father's realms by five husbands. In the Mahabharat, Panchaali was the reason behind the fame of Pandavas. Panchaali was drawn to her fate right from her birth, lived with her husbands for years in exile and a horrendous civil war with all the strong rulers of India. The enigmatic curiosity with her fellow man is her husband's most deadly adversary. Panchaali is an ardent girl to the readers, who redefines a world that is controlling warriors, spirits and hands of destiny.

Oleander Girl (2012*)*- Convinced by reviewers and readers, the artist Junot Díaz celebrated her as a "brilliant story teller" and as a "qualified cartographer of the heart" by the People magazine. Oleander Girl sings the silence surrounding the loss of a seventeen year old orphaned girl, her parents and her main heritage from them

ferociously adheres to her: the love note she finds in her mother's poetry collection. She gets worried. Korobi wishes that she will one day find a love as deep as her parents, and when she encounters the gorgeous Rajat, the only glimpse of a high profile family, her hope seems to have been fulfilled. A heart attack killed Korobi's grandfather soon after his intervention exposing significant financial issues and a shocking truth about Korobi 's history. Shattered by this revelation and the treason of her ancestors, Korobi makes a brave quest to overcome existential crisis by exploring her 'self' after 9/11.

One Amazing Thing (2010): The majority of customers including most of the staff came and left in the passport and visa department of an unnamed US town, but nine people remain. An odd, punky adolescent. A Caucasian high-class couple with a disintegrating friendship. A young Muslim-American guy with 9/11 implications. A student who is a graduate, has a love issue. An ex-soldier from the United States who was finding salvation. A illegally passed Chinese grandma. And on the brink of illicit relationship two visa office employees. In the afternoon when an earthquake rips and brings all nine characters together, their attention is on their mutual fight for survival. Little food is available. The bureau starts flowing. At a time when the mental and psychological tension is almost too much to handle, the young graduate student proposes that everyone share a personal anecdote, "one wonderful thing" about their life, which nobody has previously said. The novel also shows the transcendent force of history with the significance of human language, as their astonishing tales of passion, love, family, political upheaval, and self-discovery unfold against the urgencies of their living and dead circumstances.

The Concept of Existential Crisis

Our lives are already generally characterized by "existential crisis." It is frequently referred to in terms of the growth of pretentiousness in social interactions, the deterioration in personal development, the prevalent existence of psychotic personality attributes and the estranged sense in life and the "disappearance" or "demise" of God.

"Existential Crisis" is a term that most individuals recognize because they understand many such theologians, psychologists and sociologists who've used it the more. For it is largely through the influence of philosophers like Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Karl Marx, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir etc., that the term has come to have whatever meaning it has today.

The concept of existential crisis is never ending. It has been in existence since the creation of world as the principal confirmation of existential crisis can be found in 'Genesis' when the first man and woman, Adam and Eve got alienated from their Creator, from each other, and from their seat of bliss, when they tasted the fruit of the forbidden tree. The term is wide in context and significant if connected crosswise over different fields, for example, in law (to exchange the proprietorship privileges of one's property), in sociology (the disconnection and dehumanization while working in a capitalistic society), in literature (withdrawing affections from a formerly attached object or person: estrangement), psychology (a condition of an emotional or physical separation from other fellow beings or society at large). Society burdens an individual with submission to its norms and anyone who declines to acknowledge those norms experience existential crisis. Innumerable meanings have been credited to the idea of existential crisis, however majority of them are either obscure or misjudged. Also, different terms have been utilized to denote existential crisis by different

investigators. Some of these are pessimism, resentment, despair, anxiety and authoritarianism, absence of adequacy, distrust, credibility gap, hostility, frustration, and so forth. The greater understanding of the concept can be broadly categorized as meaninglessness, normlessness, powerlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement.

Meaninglessness refers to the feeling of people that some aspects of their lives, or style of life around them, have no meaning. It is short of ‘’going through the motion ‘’ without any sense of meaning in it.

Normlessness refers to the feeling of the absence of attachment to any definite sat of standard, or the feeling of estrangement from the accepted norms.

Powerlessness refers to the feeling of lack of control over the immediate environment, or when a person does not have any control over the work but is under the control of the hierarchy or officials or other persons that foster dependence as opposed to independence.

Social isolation refers to the feeling of man himself as an island, separated from other people, and unattached to them, without any bonds or ties of any enduring or intimate nature.

Self-estrangement is the feeling of lack of identity and sense of what one is. A person, whose relationship with those around him appears empty or unclear, or for whom there is a clear isolation of him from others, maybe called to have come to a state of self-estrangement.

Karl Marx on Existential Crisis

In spite of the fact that the concept of existential crisis had been used before Karl Marx, it is in his compositions that it first turned as an experimental and sociological idea, rather than metaphysical and philosophical concept. Hegel used ‘existential crisis’ in metaphysical sense from which Marx determined his concept of ‘existential crisis’. However, in recent decades, the word “existential crisis”has been used by philosophers, psychiatrists, and sociologists to pertain to a range of disabilities. Marx used ‘existential crisis’ to express the disconnection of man from his work, however it keeps on being applicable today. For Marx, work was a means for individuals to express their creativity and fundamental instinct.

Industrialization and urbanization have tremendously influenced the existence and identity of man. Living was more imaginative and versatile before industrialisation, for instance, artisans worked at their own speed and dictated 'what' and 'how' to produce. During the industrial revolution workers and one another become separated by the income gap and rivalry that substituted partnership.. The notion of 'existential dread,' prevailing along with the industrial revolution since 'the agrarian, craftsmen' economy was substituted through 'manufacturing modern machines' can be traced in Karl Marx's initial writings.

Established by Karl Marx and popularized by the subsequent successors, the ancient notion surrounding existential crisis posits that capitalism has corrupted the interpersonal ties which are not governed by the individuals either. This distortion leads to separation of things that belong to each other naturally and which result in antagonism in things that are established in order. Marx believes that the future would absolve the existential crisis resulting from the alienation and humanity would overcome it and live again in harmony with itself and Nature. Marx had a particular

understanding of the very sharp experience of existential crisis found in modern bourgeois society developed through understanding Hegel's concept but applied from a different perspective.

Jean Paul Sartre on Existential Crisis

Existentialist thinkers like Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Tillich and Martin Heidegger have referred to existential crisis in some form or the other. They believe, existence is of two types: authentic and unauthentic. Existential Crisis occurs from unauthentic existence. Here, man is not free to lead a life full of self-directed existence. Thus man's freedom of his choice is broken up. Helplessness sets in. Man feels isolated. Hence, it separates him from his internal power. Sartre observes that man suffers from existential crisis when he experience the 'Other's look in him.

Sartre has a different opinion of existential crisis. His concept of existential crisis is equivocal and subjective. In *Being and Nothingness (1956),* Sartre observes existential crisis occurs in the feeling of man. To him a form of his body is that which he feels in the form of body known by others. When this sense occurs in his mind that his body is an object for others, he experiences existential crisis. In *Being and Nothingness (1956)* Sartre indicates that the rise of otherness in the personality of man is the main reason of existential crisis. In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre analyzes that "man is product of his own product". Hence there is existential crisis of the self.

While Marx saw existential crisis in the context of labor class, Sartre felt existential crisis as the acceptance of objectification in life. Analyzing 'self-objectification', Sartre says, "the realization of the possible, necessarily results in the production of an object or an event in the social world; this realization is then our objectification" (*Alienation* 101). The situation of existential crisis consists in the acceptance of objectification. When man says that other man controls the production and labor of a man, existential crisis occurs. Sartre shares the same view when he says, "Each time that the enterprise of a man or of a group of men becomes an object

for other men, it becomes, for the very people who initiated it an external object which tends to dominate and survive them" (*Alienation* 63-65), hence the note of existential crisis.

Review of Literature

We have extensive research by various scholars in the field of 'existentialism, alienation and identity crisis' as represented in literary genres like novels, critical works. These concerns are so vast that numerous theoretical and psychological visionaries have also investigated them. A few of the following have indeed been explored:

Gorakh Prasad Pandey's thesis "*An Examination Of The Concept Of Alienation In Existentialism"* (http://hdl.handle.net/10603/13891 has addressed how existentialists made a significant contribution with the philosophies of Hegel, Marx, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger to pioneering the false idea of estrangement as an ideological struggle in social, philosophical and psychological fields. But the conceptual conflict of these philosophers has not been dealt with by fiction.

The research *Existentialist Concept of Alienation* by Shabnam Ashai (http://hdl.handle.net/10603/56686) is based on the comprehensive study of alienation and de-alienation with special reference to existentialism. This work has not taken any study of fictional works.

Karipaparampil George's thesis "*Existentialism as Literary Theory"* (http://hdl.handle.net/10603/60836) efforts to contrast the concepts of existentialism with other literary movements (such as renaissance, humanism, classicism, Romanticization) to demonstrate existentialism as a distinguishable theory, by linking its principle "existence precedes essence." No fictional work has been evaluated in this section.

Ashok Chaskar in his essay "The vine of desire: the study of cultural dilemmas and displacements of immigrants by Ashok chaskar Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni". The results of migration are exposed. Sister of my heart in which psychological transition takes place, The Wine of Desire . It is spotted before and after migration experienced by Sudha and Anju**.** Divakaruni' s reluctance tackles an ongoing US life that initially satisfies Trideep's father and Sudha with the new US life, and then embraces it as discussed in the essay by Ashok Chaskar. Ancestral territories as their safe area. Three mothers of an Orthodox Bengali family have traditionally raised Sudha. Thereby deceiving her sister Anju's lovable incest with Sunil, for whom she once had forsaken her buddy Ashoke. This essay showcases the nature of American culture which stated that Sudha's character is delineating "Live for yourself" and that it perplexes the East West.

Saila and N. P.V.L. N. Ramakrishna talks about the idea of movement within different times and space zones in their essay "Traveling through time: A Critical Study of the Spiegles of Fire and Dreams and Shadowland." The trialogue of the Conchs story centers on the elusive Conch in the Himalayan mountain folds as well as on the exploits of Anand, a villain in the three series and evil qualities, which make it possible for Divakaruni to combine complex subjects. Divakaruni describes the time travel for Anand in the past, by fighting evil to locate all his missing friends and shielding his shell from corruption.

Weebly's article "Alienation and Social Outcasts" discusses how the physical appearance of characters turns them an object of alienation in the society.

Raminderpal Kaur voices Divakaruni's importance and uniqueness as female characters in his article "Female Quest for Identity by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with special reference to Oleander Girl" Oleander Girl's book. The novel focuses on Korobi Roy, the heroine of her life, who merits all that an average Indian young

woman wants, but after she discovers her journey to America on her route and past background she tries to find her identity.

Research Gap/ Rationale/Significance of the Study

The above review indicates that the selected works have been analyzed from various perspectives related to existentialism, identity crisis, racism, meaninglessness, isolation and other such issues. No researcher has tried to bring all these works of the author together to study the concept of existential crisis alienation as represented in these works, especially from a chronological development point of view and also utilizing the theoretical framework of prominent existentialist philosophers Karl Marx and Jean Paul Sartre. Also the selected works present various facets of existential crisis in totally different socio-political and cultural contexts and plotted in completely different times.

Sister of My Heart, published in 1999, deals with the themes of existential crisis and angst among two females who've been forced into arrange marriages against their will and sexual orientation and how they confront and overcome through this. *The Palace of Illusions,* published in 2008, deals with the predicament of the most famous female of Indian mythology i.e. Draupadi who dispossess of socio-economic and gender equality, as well as individual identity even after being born in high-class. It explores how existential crisis leads to disillusionment. *One Amazing Thing*, published in 2010 deals with the experiences of nine people having different religion, culture and identity and they experience and come to terms with existential crisis in a foreign land with strange cultures, languages and ethnicity. *Oleander Girl*, published in 2012 deals with the experiences of grief and mourning of an orphaned female that dumps her into the darkness of existential dread. It also entails her quest for self discovery by eradicating existential crisis.

Hence as all the novels are different and set in different time periods in different contexts, it would be interesting to study the facets of existential crisis amongst the female protagonists of the selected works and how they differs in subject with the society. The works cover a time-period of more than a decade (i.e. 1999-2022).

Objectives of the Study

1. To study and understand the concept of existential crisis from the perspectives of existential philosophers: Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Sartre (1905-1980) and how much is it applicable on the psyche of females of the selected novels.
2. To study how the facets of existential crisis changed from 1999 to present) to present in various socio-political, economic, cultural, racial, ethnic and religious contexts.
3. To inquire the modes of resolution adopted by the various characters for the existential crisis and to analyze how these resolutions/ reconciliations resemble any of the solutions propounded by the aforementioned philosophers.

Research Methodology / Tools

The primary attempt would be to study the causes of existential crisis in modern society and how they impact the psyche of characters. The main questions I would investigate are -"How does existential crisis takes place?"How does it affect the psyche of the character? How it impacts the personality of an individual? Therefore, the primary objective of my study would be an in-depth analysis and holistic dimension of existential crisis which has shaped these selected works.

The methodology adopted would be to take the concepts of existential crisis as given by Karl Marx and Jean Paul Sartre (please see page 3) and to apply them to the novels selected along with the theoretical background of the concept of existential crisis as propounded by the following philosophers.

The ideas of these philosophers related to the concepts of existential crisis will be used, wherever applicable, as tools to analyze the select works. The theoretical

framework includes the major ideas related to alienation only of the following existentialist philosophers:

Karl Marx (1818-1883) developed the theory of existential crisis/ existential dread that talks about the estrangement "Entfremdung" of people from "Gattungswesen" or "species-essence" in as an outcome of capitalistic structure of society. His theory says that "in bourgeois society, capital is independent and has individuality. While the living person is dependent and has no individuality" *(Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,* 1872). He saw existential crisis in terms of alienation in the context of labor class in bourgeois society. He talks about existential crisis from a socio-economic perspective. The workers feels existential crisis through the process of production, from the product, from benefits of labor and from fellow beings. Yet he felt that the future would eradicate existential crisis, and that mankind would indeed live in peace with nature and itself (i.e. communism).

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) has a different opinion of existential crisis. His concept of existential crisis is equivocal and existentialistic. In *Being and Nothingness (1956),* Sartre observes that existential crisis occurs in the feeling of man. To him a form of his body is that which he feels in the form of body known by others. When this sense occurs in his mind that his body is an object for others, he suffers existential crisis. In *Being and Nothingness (1956)* Sartre indicates that the rise of otherness in the personality of man is the main reason of existential crisis. In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre analyzes that "man is product of his own product." Hence there is existential crisis of the self.

Tentative Chapter Scheme

Chapter 1: Introduction- This chapter will deal with the concept of existential crisis, its origin and development and its significance in the 21st century. It will also give a brief overview of the selected author and the significance of the works selected for the study.

Chapter 2: Existential Crisis in Queer- This chapter will analyze the domains of existential crisis in *Sister of My Heart.*.

Chapter 3: Quest for Female Identity- This chapter will analyze the domainsof existential crisis in *The Palace of Illusions.*

Chapter 4: Culture & Existential Crisis- This chapter will analyze the concept of existential crisis in *One Amazing Thing.*

Chapter 5: Alienation and Existential crisis- This chapter will analyze the concept of existential crisis in *Oleander Girl.*

Chapter 6: Conclusion- This chapter will sum up the observations of the study.

Limitations

The study is limited to the four selected works { *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) , *One Amazing Thing* (2010) and *Oleander Girl* (2012)}of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and the exploration of the concept of existential crisis from various philosophers will be utilized as per the need/requirement of the text under study.

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